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New Museum Theory in Practice: A Case Study of the American Visionary Art Museum and the Representation of Disability

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NEW MUSEUM THEORY IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN
VISIONARY ART MUSEUM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

NEW MUSEUM THEORY IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN VISIONARY ART MUSEUM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY

By Amanda Kyser Bryan, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Since the inception of new museum theory, and the emphasis it places on the social purpose of museums within society, museum professionals and museum studies theorists have struggled to define what role museums must take in combating prejudices and fostering better understating of difference. Richard Sandell is one such theorist who writes about the importance of, and need for, greater inclusion of disabled artists and works of art containing themes of disability into exhibitions and display. This thesis examines Sandell's scholarship, noting its foundation in new museum theory and disability studies, and then, employing a case study of the American Visionary Art Museum, illustrates the issues illuminated in Sandell's writing. Finally, utilizing the case study, this thesis will offer aims for further research within museum studies not yet considered by Sandell, especially within educational goals and activities of the museum.

Introduction

In the article “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes? Museum Collections and the Hidden History of Disability,” authors Richard Sandell, Annie Delin, Jocelyn Dodd and Jackie Gay describe their findings from a research project conducted by the University of Leicester Research Center for Museums to discover “the hidden history of disability” in the museum world of the United Kingdom.¹ The article argues that museums have the ability and responsibility to examine and redress social stereotypes, especially those surrounding mental and physical disabilities, however, the majority of museums surveyed “remain reluctant to engage with these issues.”² The authors clearly articulate a central argument “that museums have the capacity to challenge understanding of what disability has meant to society in the past and could mean in the future by contesting reductive stereotypes, addressing the ‘difficult stories’ surrounding disability history and presenting the diversity of disability experience.”³

This thesis will examine select essays and scholarship that critique museums in a similar way, investigating museums’ lack of engagement with disabled artists and works containing disability as their theme. This research will then be applied to a case study of

¹ Richard Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes? Museum Collections and the Hidden History of Disability,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20.1 (March, 2005): 5.

² Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?,” 17.

³ Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?,” 17.

the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM) in Baltimore, Maryland. I will assert that the AVAM fosters the understanding of difference, through its mission statement, publications, educational goals and exhibition display. The AVAM provides a unique opportunity to examine a museum that specializes in exhibiting work by disabled artists. Although not all visionary artists are disabled, the mission statement of the AVAM defines “visionary art” as a term that “refers to art by self-taught individuals . . . otherwise ordinary people from a wide variety of walks of life, including many who have been institutionalized or who are elderly, disabled, or from [an] industry not traditionally associated with the creation of art.”

Despite writing extensively on the subject of the representation of disability within museums, Sandell offers few definitive solutions for ameliorating the problems he identifies, choosing instead to focus on analyzing and critiquing research findings. Much of Sandell’s analysis focuses on display methods within museums. He proposes that by examining works within permanent collections and altering display methods, museums have the potential and opportunity to be a catalyst for social change by addressing stereotypes that surround disability, thus encouraging equality.⁴ By integrating themes of difference into these additional aspects of the museum, a case study of the AVAM can be used to illustrate further means of inclusion and expand on Sandell’s proposal, which focuses on display only.

The research conducted by Sandell and his colleagues is grounded in new museum theory. New museum theory was introduced in *The New Museology*, published in 1989, and most recently expanded upon in *A Companion to Museum Studies* and *New*

⁴ Richard Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2007), 195.

Museum Theory and Practice both published seventeen years later in 2006. In the introduction to *A Companion to Museum Studies* Sharon Macdonald describes aspects of new museum theory that focus on “wider social and political concerns . . . in particular ways in which differences, and especially inequalities . . . could be reproduced by disciplines” within museum settings, noting that these concerns matter because “such representations [are] fed back into the world.”⁵ Rhiannon Mason expands on this same theme in the article “Cultural Theory and Museum Studies,” which discusses how cultural meaning is made in museums and the significance of this process. Mason writes, “Museums are public spaces in which definitions of cultures and their values may be actively contested and debated.”⁶ Museums are sites where cultural meaning is made through the inclusion or exclusion of objects and themes. Sandell argues that this process of creating culture offers museums the opportunity to expand the public’s understanding of difference.

Sandell’s scholarship also resonates with issues addressed in disability studies. For example, “Representing Physical Difference: The Materiality of the Monstrous,” written by Kevin Stagg and included in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity* considers physical disability within historical literary texts. Stagg discusses general scholarship on disability studies, which is useful for this thesis because, as portions of Chapter One will show, Sandell’s scholarship is rooted in disability studies theory. Stagg

⁵ Sharon Macdonald, “Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 3.

⁶ Rhiannon Mason, “Cultural Theory and Museum Studies,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 18.

implicitly concurs with Sandell's assertion that disability is one among several categories of marginalized identities, including gender, sexual identity, race and ethnicity.⁷

Each chapter in this thesis will contribute to an overarching objective to show how the American Visionary Art Museum acts as an example of new museum theory and disability studies put to work in a museum setting. The first chapter will examine Sandell's scholarship and its foundation in new museum theory and disability studies. The second chapter will consist of a case study of the American Visionary Art Museum and describe how this institution is able to utilize its opportunity. Finally, the third chapter will expand Sandell's prescription for inclusion beyond display methods. A case study of the AVAM will be used to illustrate additional pragmatic means for incorporating disability into the museum experience.

⁷ Kevin Stagg, "Representing Physical Difference: the Materiality of the Monstrous," in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*, edited by David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (New York: Routledge, 2006), 20.

Chapter 1

A Call for Inclusion

Until recently, disability and disabled people have remained under-represented in the museum world, other than ensuring the physical accessibility of a museum itself.⁸ Through numerous books, articles and contribution to the study “Beggars Freaks and Heroes?” Richard Sandell attempts to move the dialogue on disability within museum settings beyond simply a discussion about museum visitors whose physical needs must be accommodated. Sandell argues that disabled people constitute a portion of the population whose art, history and culture has been overlooked or actively ignored by museum professionals. Citing Tony Bennett’s 2003 article “Representation and Exhibition?” Sandell writes that some museums “were purposefully designed to highlight distinctions between groups in ways which reinforced and reproduced inequitable power relations.”⁹ The distinction is created in museum settings via exclusion of disabled artists and disability as an artistic theme, juxtaposed with representations of disability predominantly appearing as beggars, cripples, or monsters. In this chapter I will first consider the

⁸ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 145. For further reading on disability accessibility in the museum see Janice Majewski and Lonnie Bunch, “The Expanding Definition of Diversity: Accessibility and Disability Culture Issues in Museum Exhibitions,” *Curator* 41.3 (1998): 153-161 and Catherine Kudlick, “The Local History Museum: So Near and Yet So Far,” *The Public Historian* 27.2 (Spring, 2005): 75-81.

⁹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 3.

historiography of Sandell's scholarship focusing on foundational texts in new museum theory and disability studies. I will then examine Sandell's research which centers on the inclusion and exclusion of disability in museum settings.

New Museum Theory

To appreciate Sandell's research on the visibility of difference within the museum world, a thorough grasp of new museum theory is necessary. By understanding the foundation of Sandell's theories it becomes clear how he came to his current point of view and the significance of the questions he asks. New museum theory has been a complicated and vast area of museum studies literature since the term was introduced by Peter Vergo in *The New Museology* to critique the social and cultural purpose of museums. Vergo defines the "principle tasks of most such institutions" at the time of publication, 1989, as existing "in order to acquire, safeguard, conserve and display objects, artefacts and works of art of various kinds."¹⁰ New theories emerged that centered on the choices made by museums and on the concepts on which museums were founded.¹¹ New museum theory began to question the museum's role in society and the burgeoning "sense of obligation that museums should not merely display the treasures to the curious and make their collections accessible to those desirous of knowledge, but also actively engage in mass education."¹² Vergo defines the "old" museology as a discipline "that is too much about museum *methods*, and too little about the purposes of

¹⁰ Peter Vergo, "The Reticent Object.," in *The New Museology*, edited by Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 41.

¹¹ Macdonald, "Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction," 2.

¹² Peter Vergo, "Introduction," in *The New Museology*, edited by Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 2.

museums.”¹³ Growing emphasis on museum education and institutional responsibility leads to questions about the content of exhibits, specifically the prejudices on which those exhibits were (often inadvertently) founded.¹⁴ Vergo argues that choices made in the collecting process by museum professionals and the subsequent display and arrangement of these objects “means placing a certain construction upon history,” a history that is then exhibited often as fact to the museum public.¹⁵

The new museum theory of today takes cues from Vergo’s scholarship and expands upon it. Like Vergo’s essay in *The New Museology*, much of the contemporary new museum theory scholarship begins with criticism of the “old” museum. For example, although most fine art museums were founded on idealistic principles that claim to be for and represent all people, in reality museums “have operated as a means for enacting social distinctions in ways that have run counter to art museums’ claims to speak to and for all citizens.”¹⁶ Many new museum theorists place the blame on museum workers for playing a central role in fostering similar negative aspects of the art museum. In *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, Janet Marstine asserts that “though museum workers commonly naturalize their policies and procedures as professional practice, the decisions these workers make reflect underlying value systems that are encoded in institutional narratives.”¹⁷

¹³ Vergo, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁴ Vergo, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁵ Vergo, “Introduction,” 2-3.

¹⁶ Tony Bennett, “Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 263.

¹⁷ Janet Marstine, “Introduction,” in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, edited by Janet Marstine (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 5.

Questions about the value system of museums have brought into focus numerous inequalities that continue to exist today. In her introduction to *A Companion to Museum Studies* Sharon Macdonald writes,

What was researched . . . came to be seen as matters to be interrogated and answered with reference not only to justifications internal to disciplines but also to wider social and political concerns. In particular, the ways in which differences, and especially inequalities . . . could be reproduced by disciplines – perhaps through exclusions from “the canon,” “the norm,” “the objective,” or “the notable” – came under the spotlight.¹⁸

Historically those differences and inequalities have focused primarily on gender, race and ethnicity.¹⁹ Museums are criticized as contributing to discrimination against minority groups by excluding them from the art and historical canons. Mason describes these acts of exclusion and inclusion as a process that “can be seen at work within museums and galleries where the act of display is always simultaneously one of definition and attribution of value; it says ‘this is art’ or ‘this is culture’.”²⁰ New museum theory encourages museums to examine the established historical prejudices that are represented within their walls.

In establishing a new social purpose for museums, new museum theory also focuses attention on the role of education. In the early nineteen-nineties the American Association of Museums commissioned a task force to re-evaluate the role of education in museums. In 1992 the group published its findings in *Excellence and Equity*:

¹⁸ Macdonald, “Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction,” 3.

¹⁹ Bennett, “Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,” 278.

²⁰ Mason, “Cultural Theory and Museum Studies,” 18.

Education and the Public Dimension of Museums. Hilde Hein describes the report as placing “public service and education at the center of the museum’s mission.”²¹ The conclusion of *Excellence and Equity* asserts that the educational role of the museum is “to enrich learning opportunities for all individuals and to nurture an enlightened, humane citizenry that appreciates the value of knowing about its past, is resourcefully and sensitively engaged in the present, and is determined to shape a future in which many experiences and many points of view are given.”²² Through educational programs museums are able to actively communicate their social purposes as defined by new museum theory.

Finally, new museum theory strives to address questions surrounding exactly whom these new educational theories should reach. Many theorists propose that each museum has an obligation to serve its immediate community. Citing Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Marstine utilizes the term “post-museum” to describe a new museum that “actively seeks to share power with the communities it serves,” and “instead of transmitting knowledge to an essentialized mass audience, the post-museum listens and responds sensitively as it encourages diverse groups to become active participants in museum discourse.”²³

²¹ Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004), 106.

²² Ellen Hirzy Cochran, ed. *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Washington, DC: The American Association of Museums, 1992), 25.

²³ Marstine, “Introduction,” 19.

Disability Studies

Disability studies are becoming more prominent as a theme in scholarship on marginalized populations of society, similar to the way that feminist studies and queer theory have moved the discourse on these subjects into mainstream consciousness. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, “Although much recent scholarship explores how difference and identity operate in such politicized constructions as gender, race, and sexuality, cultural and literary criticism has generally overlooked the related perceptions of corporeal otherness we think of as . . . physical disability.”²⁴

Disability studies began to develop as a cohesive area of study following the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. In the introduction to *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland Thomson cite the Americans with Disabilities Act for their definition of disability as encompassing “physical, sensory, and mental impairments; illness; congenital and acquired differences thought of as disfigurements or deformities; psychological disabilities; stamina limitations due to disease or its treatment; developmental differences; and visible anomalies such as birthmarks, scarring, and the marks of aging.”²⁵

As many disability theorists point out, every member of the human population will at one time in life become disabled in some way.²⁶ There have always been members

²⁴ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5.

²⁵ Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction: Integrating Disability into Teaching and Scholarship,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 1-2.

²⁶ Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 14.

of every society and culture that fall under the definition of disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act, but very few representations of this population within modern society. Katherine Ott identifies this paradox within visual histories of the U.S. as thus:

People present a spectrum of body types, and until recent decades, the most common physical traits included being arthritic, stooped, pock-marked, scarred, toothless, or bent and injured in some way. Difference was everywhere, yet it is missing from the history we present to the public. The healthy, idealized figures in exhibits, films, and re-enactments are as false as the landscaped and manicured grounds of Civil War battlefields.²⁷

If disability is so common in life, why does it remain such an overlooked aspect of visual culture and history? One answer may be that “disability tends to be figured in cultural representations as an absolute state of otherness that is opposed to a standard. . . . In stigmatizing and distancing ourselves from disability, we participate in late-capitalist culture’s relentless attempt to standardize and stabilize the body.”²⁸ With technological advances in medicine people in modern society are able to alter physical attributes making physical difference something to be avoided.²⁹

Although much of the scholarship on disability studies focuses on the representation of disability in literature, many parallels can be made to new museum theory. For example the author Annie Delin combines aspects of disability studies and new museum theory in “Buried in the Footnotes: The Absence of Disabled People in the

²⁷ Katherine Ott, “Disability and the Practice of Public History: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 27.2 (Spring, 2005): 21.

²⁸ Snyder, Brueggemann, Thomson, “Introduction,” 2.

²⁹ Snyder, Brueggemann, Thomson, “Introduction,” 2.

Collective Imagery of Our Past,” an essay included in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, edited by Sandell. Delin’s article also acted as impetus for the later study “Beggars Freaks and Heroes?” Much of Delin’s argument is based on the theory of “Hidden History,” a term she borrows from Anne Lawrence. In *Women in England in 1500-1760: A Social History*, Lawrence defines “hidden history” as the following:

The term Hidden History is used when the history of a hitherto neglected group begins to appear: as, for example, in the case of black history, women’s history, lesbian and gay history . . . The phrase is not simply used to describe the group’s emergence into mainstream history: it also has an explicit message that these groups have lacked a history because society has been willing to see them as a separate group with particular rights. Groups hidden from history are hidden for three reasons. They are hidden because of prejudices against the group in the past, because of modern prejudices, and because of the absence of records.³⁰

The concept of a hidden history is a key component in both disability studies and new museum theory. The discovery and examination of disability’s hidden history has been a fundamental catalyst for the creation of disability studies as a discipline. Simultaneously, new museum theory argues that prejudices of the past are reinforced in many museum settings and thus encourage modern prejudices.

New museum theory and disability studies share many of the same arguments for change and equality of representation. Just as new museum theory seeks to illuminate and amend the social inequalities that have been fostered in museum settings, research represented by essays in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* “seeks to redress

³⁰ Anne Lawrence, *Women in England in 1500-1760: A Social History* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 3.

the exclusion of disability and disabled people from our critical discourse.”³¹ Sharon Snyder notes, “The ability of art to mobilize representations of disability in so many antithetic directions serves as a wellspring of disability studies scholarship.”³² Thus she asks two pertinent questions: “Do art and literature flatly participate in the ideological prescription of attitudes? Or do they offer self-reflexive commentaries on cultural beliefs about disabilities?”³³ New museum theory would argue that art in the fine art museums both reflects commonly held cultural beliefs and participates in the creation of these beliefs as well.

Disability does appear in works of fine art.³⁴ For example there are many historical paintings depicting Biblical themes that contain figures with disabilities. These figures are almost always displayed as a disfigured form who is receiving or in need of help from Jesus Christ or God. Unfortunately, works of art containing images of disabled people that have been included in the canon of art history predominantly show disabled individuals who do not play a central role in the work; rather they are portrayed as beggars, cripples or monsters.

³¹ Snyder, Brueggemann, Thomson, “Introduction,” 3.

³² Sharon L. Snyder, “Infinites of Forms: Disability Figures in Artistic Traditions,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 190.

³³ Snyder, “Infinites of Forms,” 190.

³⁴ For a discussion of images of disability within the art historical cannon see Sharon Snyder, “Infinites of Form,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 173-196.

Richard Sandell and the Display of Difference

As a new museum theorist, Sandell poses such questions as: What is the purpose of the museum? Can the museum be used for a greater good? In much of his research, Sandell argues on behalf of the disabled population, a population that he and many other new museum theorists and disability theorists believe is “under-represented in museum display.”³⁵ For Sandell and others like Janet Marstine, “museums don’t just represent cultural identity, they produce it.”³⁶

In many ways Sandell is firmly in line with the new museum theorists already cited in this thesis. Sandell’s introduction to *Museums, Society, Inequality*, first published in 2002, presents a number of fundamental reasons why changes in museums are important. The first sentence of the introduction reads, “Museums and galleries of all kinds have both the potential to contribute towards the combating of social inequality and a responsibility to do so.”³⁷ This idea is echoed throughout new museum theory. In this same text Sandell also asserts that “within the cultural sector, fundamental questions about the social purpose and role of museums and galleries, that have for many decades been marginalized, have more recently been foregrounded and have achieved a currency and confidence that have proved difficult to ignore.”³⁸ The development of new museum

³⁵ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 8-9. On the topic of the under-representation of disabled people within museum displays Sandell specifically cites Janice Majewski and Lonnie Bunch. “The Expanding Definition of Diversity: Accessibility and Disability Culture Issues in Museum Exhibition.” *Curator* 41.3 (1998): 153-160, Annie Delin, “Buried in the Footnotes: the Absence of Disabled People in the Collective Imagery of Our Past,” in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, edited by Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 84-97, and Katherine Ott, “Disability and the Practice of Public History: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 27, no. 2 (Spring, 2005): 11-24.

³⁶ Marstine, “Introduction,” 4.

³⁷ Sandell, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁸ Sandell, “Introduction,” 4.

theory and the questions posed by its scholars have led to this continuing dialogue.

Sandell argues that because museums have begun to state publicly that they play an important role in social change, they should be held accountable for their actions.³⁹

Throughout his scholarship Sandell has chosen to focus on disability, and he argues that though museums claim that they are able to break down stereotypes and prejudices, they in fact do little for those misconceptions and the intolerance pertaining to disability.

Sandell's criticism of museums fall in line with disability theorists who argue that rather than dispel specific stereotypes, museums have encouraged mainstream prejudices. He asks, "How can museums hope to represent all sections of society when group identities are increasingly conceived, not as singular and fixed, but rather as multiple and shifting? Which forms of difference are deemed authentic, valid and thereby privileged over others for inclusion, whilst others are left aside?"⁴⁰ Specific exhibition practices have come under fire in much of Sandell's writing. He argues that museum exhibits "have social effects and consequences" that are often negative and have "privileged ways of seeing that have made prejudiced understandings of difference more perceptible and permissible, that close off, rather than open up, possibilities for mutual understanding, respect and social justice."⁴¹ Citing findings from the study "Beggars, Heroes and Freaks?," Sandell refers to common examples of close-minded representations of disability: "Disabled people were often represented as poor, passive, sexless and

³⁹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 2.

⁴⁰ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 7.

⁴¹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 139.

dependent, frequently seen as an economic drain, needing to be cared for, and unable to be productive in terms of employment or creativity.”⁴²

As already addressed in this thesis, Sandell chose disability as a focus for much of his scholarship because of the lack of attention this group receives in the museum world. In the ongoing development of new museum theory, many scholars have called attention to the void in representing other marginalized groups in society, but rarely is the disabled population mentioned. In *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* Sandell refers to an article, “The Expanding Definition of Diversity: Accessibility and Disability Culture Issues in Museum Exhibitions,” written by Janice Majewski and Lonnie Bunch and published in the September 1998 issue of *Curator*. The article discusses three concerns pertaining to representations of disability in the museum. The first is focused on physical access to museums, “getting into, through, and out of the exhibition space (which is, of course preceded by getting into, through and out of the museum itself).”⁴³ The second concern deals with the accessibility of exhibition content, including “theme and information” for all visitors, specifically that museums are responsible for making sure all museum visitors are able to understand and absorb the theme and information pertaining to each exhibit.⁴⁴ The third concern is one of the foundations for much of Sandell’s work on museum exhibitions; here Majewski and Bunch highlight the need for museums to include exhibitions that contain themes relevant to disabled peoples’ lives, including both disabled artists and, as Sandell writes, works with “disability-related

⁴² Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 159.

⁴³ Majewski and Bunch, “The Expanding Definition of Diversity,” 154.

⁴⁴ Majewski and Bunch, “The Expanding Definition of Diversity,” 154.

narratives.”⁴⁵ Just as many disability theorists have pointed out the hidden story of disability in history and literature, Majewski and Bunch point to this void in visual history and culture. They write, “Issues of general historical or social interest (e.g., immigration policy; the Industrial Revolution) rarely address the key involvement of people with disabilities. Art created by people with disabilities (e.g. Claude Monet, Chuck Close) is not acknowledged as such. And crowd scenes rarely incorporate people with visible disabilities.”⁴⁶ Sandell concurs with Majewski and Bunch in their belief that this responsibility falls to exhibitioners.

Taking this idea one step further, Sandell also asks, when representations are included, do they “rely on (and reinforce) the limited range of negative stereotypes found in other media forms?”⁴⁷ Sandell, in accordance with other new museum theorists, is concerned with how museums sustain stereotypes. Sandell makes a key observation in his discussion of a study, *Understanding Prejudice: Attitudes Towards Minorities*, written by Gill Valentine and Ian McDonald in 2004. This study began with a 2003 survey, “Profiles of Prejudice” in which nearly 1700 British citizens were interviewed to establish “the extent of prejudice against minority groups in England.”⁴⁸ The resulting 2004 study extends the earlier research and is based on focus group and one-on-one interviews with study participants. As this and other research shows, prejudice toward disabled individuals is complicated and unlike stereotypes of other groups, which use harsh and

⁴⁵ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 147.

⁴⁶ Majewski and Bunch, “The Expanding Definition of Diversity,” 157.

⁴⁷ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice the Reframing of Difference*, 148.

⁴⁸ Gill Valentine and Ian MacDonald, *Understanding Prejudice: Attitudes Towards Minorities* (London: Stonewall, 2004), 7.

negative discourse, most language used to describe disability is filled with sympathy.⁴⁹

Sandell describes the results of the Valentine and McDonald survey as finding that most people surveyed were in strong support of “an equality agenda (especially in relation to service provision) for disabled people.”⁵⁰ However, respondents were most concerned with helping those with disability in a way that demonstrated their pity towards the disabled. Sandell also notes that though those surveyed had contact with people with disabilities, the respondents themselves acknowledged that these interactions were awkward. He writes, “Though distinct from other forms of prejudice in several respects, the *effects* of disablism are no less debilitating than those that may be delivered in more hateful and malevolent terms. Disablism, many have powerfully argued, operates to close off opportunities for disabled people in all aspects of everyday life.”⁵¹

Sandell’s research concentrates on issues of exhibition and display. At the heart of his work in *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* are analyses of multiple audience response studies that he conducted at two museums — the Anne Frank House, and the St Mungo Museum of Religious Art — focusing on “issues of reception and consumption” by the audience, and “investigating the ways in which audiences respond to exhibitions developed with these aims [enhancing understanding, tolerance and respect for difference] in mind.”⁵² The surveys were intended to gauge audience response to exhibits and museums purposely designed to combat prejudice. Sandell’s findings, along

⁴⁹ For more in depth discussion on “sympathetic prejudice” see Kudlick, “The Public Art Museum: So Near and Yet so Far,” 768.

⁵⁰ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 143.

⁵¹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 143.

⁵² Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 12. Sandell juxtaposes his findings with “the agency of media,” meaning that museums work alongside other forms of media (newspapers, television) in constructing and destabilizing stereotypes and prejudices. Media agency is beyond the scope of this thesis.

with his analysis of museum exhibition practices, contribute to recommendations that can be applied to museums. There are a number of modern museums, including the American Visionary Art Museum, that make strides towards greater diversity in a way that is similar to Sandell's theories.

Chapter 2

Representing “Ordinary People”: The American Visionary Art Museum

“If it is not quite an ‘anti-museum’ or a ‘visionary museum,’ it is an ‘outsider museum’.”⁵³

The Visionary Art Museum opened in 1995 and now contains three separate buildings and an outdoor sculpture garden. A large portion of the main building is covered in a mosaic made from glass and tile, and a giant whirligig that stands fifty-five feet tall, created by visionary artist Vollis Simpson is located near the main entrance (figure 1). Rebecca Hoffberger, both the founder and director of the AVAM, comes from a non-academic background and has a self-proclaimed general disregard for the mainstream museum world. In a 2000 interview with the New York Times Hoffberger said, “I’m always amazed at how much junk there is in the academic world which passes for truth.”⁵⁴ In that same interview Hoffberger is also quoted as saying, “I have no interest in being a player in the art world. I have no background in the arts. Everything I do is intuitive.”⁵⁵ The AVAM has a small permanent collection comprised of works of art that were gifts to the museum, but has no curators on staff. Rather than making scholarship and research the focus and purpose of the museum, the AVAM concentrates

⁵³ Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius: Self-taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 253.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Mansfield, “THE NEW POPULISM; ‘Rebecca’s World’ of Visionary Art and Big, Splashy Parties,” *The New York Times* (April 19, 2000).

⁵⁵ Mansfield, “THE NEW POPULISM.”

on fostering creativity, understanding and learning in its visitors through an emphasis on education. In many ways the museum encourages creativity by examining disability and difference. The AVAM is an example of an institution that implements the representation of difference in a similar way as expressed by Richard Sandell in his scholarship. The mission statement, educational goals, publications and exhibition methods and display encourage the inclusion of disabled people into every aspect of the museum. By focusing on understanding and inclusion of disability and difference the museum also enacts certain concepts found in new museum theory.

Despite offering only a few concrete recommendations for the museum itself to implement beyond basic inclusion of works by disabled artists, Sandell poses many critical questions pertaining to the representation of disability in fine art museums. For the purposes of this thesis I conducted three separate visits to the AVAM. The first visit took place in February 2008, during which I gleaned a general feel for the museum as well as foundational information. The following two visits produced the bulk of the information found in this case study. My second visit focused on technical aspects of the museum including exhibition theme, information provided in wall text, and the art works themselves. During this visit I was looking specifically for examples of work by disabled artists and examples of themes pertaining to disability within the exhibitions. During my third visit I utilized ideas found directly in Sandell's scholarship. One aspect of Sandell's research in *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* is visitor interviews that he conducted at St. Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art in May and June of 2003, and interviews conducted at the Anne Frank House during August 2003. The findings from my visit to the AVAM on October 14, 2008 is a reflection of questions

asked by Sandell during his visitor interviews, specifically those pertaining to the museum visit and experience which can be found in the appendix 1 of *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. The questions are as follows:

5. What part or parts of the museum did you like most or find most interesting?

Why?

6. Were there any parts of the museum you didn't like or found least interesting?

Why?

7. Were there any particular parts of the museum that prompted you to pause for discussion or to share your thoughts (with your friends/family/companion/ or with museum staff?) For example, was there any part of the museum that you found especially provocative? If yes- What kinds of things did you talk about?

Because Sandell relied so heavily on his findings in these case studies, I thought it might be beneficial to frame my third museum visit in reference to a portion of his questions.

My personal experiences visiting the AVAM will contribute to my analysis of each aspect of the museum.⁵⁶ It might be argued that one person's museum visits are not sufficient analysis to fully critique an institution, however, authors like Irene Stylianides have been able to show that a singular personal experience is a useful critical tool. Citing Norman Denzin, Stylianides writes, "the individual with her/his experiences gives new meaning to the object" and in this way each individual experience is useful.⁵⁷ This case

⁵⁶ For a discussion of different practices and approaches to exhibition evaluation and analysis, including a brief discussion of Irene Stylianides, "Autobiography & Personal Encounters with Art," see Margaret Lindauer, "What to Ask and How to Answer: a Comparative Analysis of Methodologies and Summative Exhibit Evaluation," *Museum and Society* 3, no. 3 (November 2005): 137-152.

⁵⁷ Irene Stylianides, "Autobiography & Personal Encounters with Art," in *Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries: An International Reader*, edited by Maria

study will focus on my personal notes and experiences recorded during two visits I made to the museum on September 27, 2008 and October 14, 2008, as well as analysis of materials published by the museum. These materials include the mission statement, educational goals and the annual publication, *Visions Magazine*.

Personal Experience

September 27, 2008

Although not my first trip to the museum for the purposes of this thesis, September 27th did mark my initial visit as a critical observer. The museum exhibition space is divided into two parts; one houses art works from the permanent collection on the first and third floors, and the rest of the museum is dedicated to semi-permanent exhibits, called “mega-exhibitions,” curated by guest curators, which last for roughly a year. These large exhibits have an overarching theme, such as religion, and are made up of both borrowed works of art and works from the museum’s permanent collection. The mega-exhibit flows throughout most the gallery space of the main building. During my September visit, installation of an upcoming mega-exhibit was underway but not yet complete, therefore my observations and critique on that day focused on the museum’s permanent collection.

The first floor exhibition space dedicated to the permanent collection is a dimly lit room with its own entrance and exit located across from the gift shop. There is no introductory wall text and no overarching theme is presented in this space. Rather, a small biography is given for each artist featured along with two or three works of art. I

began at the far left wall of the room and read the biography of the first artist located at the entrance of the exhibit, Eddie Arning, accompanied by two of the artist's works (figure 2). This panel gave basic biographical information including date of birth and death and that the artist lived in Texas. As I continued to read, I learned that Arning was mentally disabled and spent much of his lifetime in a mental hospital. The text states:

In his twenties he showed signs of mental illness which was later diagnosed as schizophrenia. He had frequent bouts of depression, as well as violence. He was committed to the state hospital in Austin, Texas in 1928. Until age sixty-five, he spent most of his life in the hospital, and then in a series of nursing homes.

Shortly after leaving the hospital Arning began drawing the first of several thousand works in crayon or oil pastels, most of them inspired by illustrations or advertisements from magazines, but reinterpreted through his own personal iconographic style.

As I moved around the room I realized that this text was similar in content to roughly half of the other small wall panels that contained the biographies of mentally and physically disabled artists. All the panels contain brief descriptions of the disability of each artist and often include some detail about their life within different mental and physical institutions. Most disabled artists featured created their art while institutionalized. I was drawn to a second disabled artist, Martin Ramirez. The final sentence of this artist's biography read, "Only 300 plus works survive – those which Martin carefully hid from the hospital's daily mandatory destruction policy that was then in effect for all patient artistry." It struck me that his biography illuminates an aspect of the history of disabled artists who have been institutionalized. Some psychiatric hospitals routinely destroyed art

made by disabled patients, affirming the prejudice that art by disabled artists are not significant as works of fine art and should be disposed of.

Not far down the wall from the works of Martin Ramirez is a striking wooden sculpture by an anonymous artist, untitled and dated 1950. The work is very simplistic with little detail but it clearly portrays a figure standing roughly three feet tall, slightly bent with a concave chest (figure 3). An excerpt from the wall text that accompanies this work reads,

This lone figure was carved from a single apple tree trunk. It was created as a self-portrait by a British mental patient who had a distinctive concave chest from years of tuberculosis . . . For a month he whittled the wood down to this figure.

The artist, in his thirties, committed suicide about two years after leaving the hospital. This applewood figure is his only known work of art.

Not only was this work created by a disabled person, the work itself clearly illustrates the physical disability resulting from tuberculosis.

Tucked away on the third floor of the museum is the second gallery exhibiting works from the permanent collection. This exhibit space is smaller than the first floor gallery and contains more of a cohesive exhibit with a title and introductory wall panel (figures 4 and 5). The title is *OCD – Obsessive-Compulsive Delight* and the exhibit contains the work of four artists: Ted Gordon, Ted's late wife Zona Gordon, Grace Bashara Greene and Judith Ann Scott. My immediate reaction was ambivalence. On the one hand, I appreciated the curator's attempt at humor by creating a title that is intended to perhaps put the viewer at ease with a complicated theme. On the other hand, I also felt

uncomfortable with the casual and somewhat jovial attitude implied in the title and introductory wall text. The introductory wall text reads:

We have called this exhibition *OCD – Obsessive-Compulsive Delight* as a means of acknowledging and celebrating the many remarkable creative contributions that a dash of OCD can help bestow. “OCD” is the traditional medical abbreviation of what can be a very serious mental illness – Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder – a disease in which sufferers may fixate on cleanliness, order, and ritualized repetition of words or actions to a degree that can dramatically impair the conduct of their daily lives, relationships, and work.

This text does a number of things. First, it gives a brief definition for the mental disability that the four-featured artists share. I appreciated that the text gave a serious description of the disease but I was uncomfortable with the phrase “a dash of OCD” found in the first line of the text. This implies that the artists represented in the exhibit are only afflicted with the disease in some small way, yet this implication is in conflict with other parts of the artists’ biographies. The text accompanying Grace Bashara Greene’s work states that following the marriage of her daughter, Greene spent the next thirty years of her life “virtually alone, becoming a compulsive collector and eventually filling her house nearly floor to ceiling with items she purchased from flea markets, antique shops, and yard sales.” This description does not describe a woman with “a dash of OCD,” but rather someone with a serious mental illness. The introductory wall text goes on to state,

However, in its more benign manifestations, OCD can serve as a key ingredient in the process of generating prolific, intensely focused, and often meticulously detailed creative production of all sort. Hyper-conscious teachers, researchers,

theorists, chefs, medical staff, writers, performers, sports stars, and visionary artists frequently display elements of OCD behavior that actually aid in bringing about extraordinary beneficent results and performances . . .

The text then lists many mainstream occupations that might allow a person with this disability to utilize aspects of the disorder as a positive tool. This section of the text made me wonder if those with the disease would view it as such a positive aspect of their lives. While possible having contributed to their artistic production, the disorder has also severely affected other aspects of the artists' lives. The text then goes on to point out that OCD has been represented in popular culture in such films as *As Good as It Gets* in which the main character suffers from OCD. This section of the museum directly discusses a mental disability and uses it as a theme to exhibit four different artists. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is not mentioned directly in any of the smaller biographic wall panels accompanying each individual artist, however, the descriptions of the works themselves and artists' creative process allude to the disability.

October 14, 2208

My second visit to the museum was longer and more investigative than the first. During the two weeks between my visits the museum's mega-exhibit *The Marriage of Art and Philosophy* opened.

I began this visit on the second floor. Entering into *The Marriage of Art and Philosophy*, I wrote in my notes that I felt overwhelmed by the exhibit and did not know where to start. The gallery space was filled with many works of art and numerous large wall panels that displayed information about the exhibit itself, and other panels with

artists' biographies. With no clear beginning or ending I decided to start with a section of the exhibit titled, "An Invitation to Play," reading a small introductory wall panel and then found, just as in the permanent collection room, a brief biography posted beside one to three examples of each artist's work. As I walked into the back room of this portion of the museum I scanned the biography of the artist Frank Calloway. His biography is lengthy and describes different aspects of his life within a psychiatric hospital. The text states that he was institutionalized for being "disoriented" and received sub-standard care for the first portion of his life due to the "segregated, inpatient housing for African Americans." Following a lawsuit, patient care was equalized for all patients and it was then that Calloway was first able to express his artistic abilities by creating large-scale murals (such as the one in figure 6). The text goes on to praise the institution where Calloway still lives, the Alice M. Kidd psychiatric/geriatric nursing home. As I read I realized that the museum maintains a close relationship with this particular artist and I wondered if this could be one reason why the text speaks so positively about this particular institution. The founder Rebecca Hoffberger is quoted on the panel as saying, "His care on the Bryce Hospital Campus in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, is about the finest, most respectful, and loving I have ever seen anywhere." The text also included a few quotes from the artist himself which read "You have to be good to people. If you're good to people and do right and work hard, than you can have a good life."

On the third floor I re-visited the exhibit *OCD – Obsessive-Compulsive Delight*. I focused on a portion of the exhibit that is against the left wall (figure 7). Four pieces of art are located on a raised platform with a photograph placed on the wall behind. I was able to locate the text this time on the platform at the far right. I was drawn to this portion

of the exhibit because of a striking photograph, presumably of the artist, Judith Ann Scott (figure 8), though the image was not labeled as such. As I began to read the text I realized that unlike the text describing Frank Calloway's work and life, the text was not a positive description of the institution. The text describes that, unlike her twin sister Joyce who was "normal in every way, Judith was diagnosed with Down Syndrome and deafness, and could not speak." The text then goes on to say how Judith was "rescued" by her sister 36 years after being institutionalized and Judith was then "handed back to her." In terms of tone, this text is in conflict with the introductory panel. It felt very serious while the other panel and even the title of the exhibit itself is lighthearted and jovial.

As I sat on the floor copying the text, an older French man entered the room. He made his way around the room and then came to stand beside me to read the text. When he was done the gentleman walked away but then shortly returned and told me he needed to read the passage a second time. He also asked me if I have ever heard of a museum in Luusanne, Switzerland, that also specializes in visionary art and I assumed he was referring to The Collection de l'Art Brut. He said that the work of Judith Ann Scott reminded him of the work from that museum which he considers "the most powerful." This same man also told me he found the photograph of the artist very expressive and powerful as well. Simultaneously while I was chatting with the French man another woman walked up to the work. It appeared to me that she became somewhat emotional while looking at the work. Having overheard the man's comments about the powerful nature of Judith Ann Scott's work, the woman told us she agreed with his sentiment, then wiped her eyes and walked away.

I believe the inclusion of the photograph of Scott (figure 8) is one reason why these visitors, and myself as well, found these works so moving. The image of Scott clinging so fiercely to one of her pieces reinforces the deep emotions that these two visitors felt when looking at her work. The black and white image of Scott's passion for her works gives them greater significance to the viewer.

As I walked away from the OCD exhibit I felt just as ambivalent as I did when I first entered and saw the exhibit title. Although I appreciate the museum's attempt to educate and make the public more comfortable with a serious mental condition, the desired effect may not have been achieved. Now I question the entire theme of the exhibit. If these artists are considered obsessive compulsive because of their intense focus and strong attachment to their work, than couldn't most artists be considered obsessive compulsive? Although this paradox left me confused, I enjoyed this portion of the museum because I found it to be the most approachable. This exhibit also fostered the most fruitful discussion between myself and other museum visitors.

Display Methods at the American Visionary Art Museum

A case study of the American Visionary Art Museum exposes evidence of a number of ways to present disability thoughtfully within a museum setting. Clearly the AVAM has an advantage in that it was founded with the sole purpose of exhibiting and promoting a genre of art that is often made by disabled artists. The AVAM did not have to "dig through their collection" when looking for works by disabled artists, having been

founded with the intent to exhibit works by disabled artists.⁵⁸ As my personal experiences documented, the AVAM falls in line with many display and exhibit methods that Sandell recommends for museums. In their study “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?” Sandell and his colleagues found that many museums have works of art that include representations of disability in the museum’s permanent collections. Curators and staff expressed uncertainty about how to properly display these objects without offending people with disabilities. The study found that “where objects were exhibited, their link to disability was seldom made explicit in labels,” thereby reinforcing “the cultural invisibility and distorted representation of disabled people in museums.”⁵⁹ Many museums grapple with how to tell “the difficult stories around disability” without making audiences uncomfortable.⁶⁰ The AVAM seamlessly incorporates images of disability, exemplified in my discussion of the applewood carved figure (figure 3).

Sandell also suggests that museums possibly consult or collaborate with members of the disabled community so that “museums might equip themselves with the expertise and the perspectives to inform the ways in which they tackle the representation of disability.”⁶¹ At the end of the article “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes? Museum Collections

⁵⁸ Annie Delin introduces this term in “Buried in the footnotes,” in *Museums, Society Inequality*, edited by Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 96. Richard Sandell also reiterates the importance of this idea in *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2007).

⁵⁹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 159. Also see Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes? Museum Collections and the Hidden History of Disability,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20.1 (March, 2005): 5-19.

⁶⁰ Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?,” 16.

⁶¹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 171. A similar practice of inclusion has been incorporated into a number of museums’ exhibition development including at the National Museum of Australia and the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Oregon. Though not related to disability, both institutions worked with members of specific cultural and ethnic groups whose history and visual culture was put on display. See Howard Morphy, “Sites of Persuasion: *Yingapungapu* at the National Museum of Australia,” in *Museums Frictions: Public*

and the Hidden History of Disability” the authors pose a handful of questions about the display dilemmas facing exhibition curators. Sandell and the other authors question when it is most appropriate to make a clear connection between the artist or artistic content and disability and also how specific works of art can be “interpreted in ways which reflect and incorporate perspectives and insights from disabled people.”⁶² During my visit to the museum I wrote about the artist Frank Calloway and the close relationship between the artist and the AVAM I felt was articulated in the wall text. The quotes from both Rebecca Hoffberger and the artist himself demonstrate that a professional relationship between museums and disabled artists is possible and can contribute to a better understanding of the artist and works of art. In addition Sandell recognizes the tensions that museums face in representing disability in a fair and positive way while simultaneously “acknowledging and exploring the sometimes challenging, painful and difficult stories associated with disability.”⁶³

Sandell analyzes an additional challenge that faces museum personnel: how and when to directly discuss an artist’s disability or artistic themes of disability within works of art. Here too Sandell writes at length about these points but seems unable to articulate his opinion of how to do it. In one study Sandell found that some curators argued, “there were benefits to be gained from stating an artist was disabled, particularly in terms of destigmatising disability and challenging persistent negative stereotypes.”⁶⁴ Sandell notes that many museums now include biographical information about artists, and he speculates

Culture/Global Transformations, edited by Ivan Karp, Corrine A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 469-499, and Terry Eagleton, “Versions of Culture,” in *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 1-31.

⁶² Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?,” 16.

⁶³ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 168.

⁶⁴ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 165.

that the inclusion of an artist's disability in bibliographic information could contribute to a better understanding of both artist and artwork.⁶⁵ The AVAM chooses to approach the subject briefly in the wall text that accompanies each artist. Because the museum itself was founded with the intent and purpose to display works by both "ordinary" and disabled artists, the institution does not have to grapple with issues of "outing" disabled artists.⁶⁶ The AVAM includes brief facts pertaining to an artist's disability relative to his or her biography. In doing so the AVAM is also able to address a portion of disability's "hidden history," which includes aspects of the history of institutions. An example from this case study is the wall text for the artist Martin Ramirez. In this text the AVAM includes information about the facility Ramirez spent many years in, including the fact that artistic works made by patients were regularly destroyed there. This sheds light on the possibility that the destruction of work was a common practice in institutions. Sandell is concerned about a perceived tension between "celebrating and affirming difference through positive forms of representation, and . . . acknowledging and exploring the sometimes challenging, painful and difficult stories associated with disability" that surfaced within the study.⁶⁷ Wall text from the exhibit *OCD – Obsessive-Compulsive Delight* provides a second example of how the AVAM is able to incorporate material about disability into an exhibition. Here the AVAM includes a clinical definition of obsessive-compulsive disorder, educating the public about a serious mental disease.

By choosing to focus on the findings from "Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?" Sandell positions his scholarship to concentrate solely on aspects of display. Many members of

⁶⁵ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 165.

⁶⁶ For his discussion on "outing" artists see Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 165-167.

⁶⁷ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 168.

the museum staff interviewed voiced concern about how to display images of disability without encouraging the visitor to stare. Sandell cites the creation and popularity of “freakshows” during the nineteenth century as a probable contribution to anxiety felt by museum staff surrounding the potential of museum visitors to stare.⁶⁸ Here Sandell does offer a vague recommendation for museum personnel and writes that there are “ways of redressing the cultural invisibility of disabled people by framing the visitor’s gaze in particular ways.”⁶⁹ The case study of the AVAM demonstrates that including images of disabled artists can contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of the work itself. Earlier in the chapter I wrote about my experience with another museum visitor who felt that the photograph of the artist Judith Ann Scott (figure 8) was very moving. The man, like a second museum visitor who joined our conversation briefly, referred to the photograph as being “extremely powerful.” I also believe that the photograph gives a better understanding of the artist herself, as well as the artistic process. By including only a few select images of the artists themselves, the AVAM is able to use the images to enhance visitor understanding and appreciation of the works of art, rather than emphasizing the physical difference of the artists.

Published and Written Text

The American Visionary Art Museum also incorporates disability into a number of its written and published documents, including its mission statement, educational goals and publication *Visions Magazine*. By critically examining the aforementioned I uncover ways in which an institution is able to expand on Richard Sandell’s theories and

⁶⁸ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 161.

⁶⁹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 162.

incorporate disability into a number of different aspects of the museum beyond exhibit development and display.

Mission Statement

The mission statement of the American Visionary Art Museum is much longer than most fine art museum statements. Excerpts from it can be found on the museum's website, including the portion below. The statement begins with the museum's dedication to "increasing the public's awareness" of visionary art and then goes on to broadly define the visionary artist and visionary art:

Visionary art as defined for the purpose of AVAM refers to art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without any formal training artistic training, whose works arise from an intensity of innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act it self. As such, it is not inherently created for sale or merchandising through developed or formal commercial channels. Except that they have discovered in themselves the ability to accomplish something extraordinary, visionary artists are often otherwise ordinary people from a wide variety of walks of life, including many who have been institutionalized, or who are elderly, disabled, or from [an] industry not traditionally associated with the creation of art, to aid the audience in overcoming any negative bias associated with the circumstances of its creativity.

The statement emphasizes that people who may have been institutionalized and disabled are included in the definition of "ordinary people" as well as visionary artist. I believe one of the most significant portions of the statement is found at the end of this passage. In

stating that one purpose of the museum is “to aid the audience” in overcoming their own prejudices and misconceptions of both disabled artists and works containing disability as a theme, the museum implicitly enacts new museum theory. As already discussed in Chapter One, one aspect of new museum theory is the examination of a museum’s ability and responsibility to combat social prejudices as well as foster a better understanding for historically under-represented portions of society. The AVAM’s mission statement can also be connected to Sandell’s assertion that museums have the potential authority to “operate as sites for the staging of interventions designed to confront, undercut or reshape dominant regimes of representation that underpin and inform contemporary attitudes towards disability.”⁷⁰

Educational Goals

As with many other aspects of the museum, the AVAM takes a unique approach with its educational goals. Although most museums have education departments, and many have lengthy lists of educational activities for the public, few have clearly listed goals that are easily accessible. These goals are presented on the AVAM website, in AVAM literature found at the front desk and listed on the interior wall of the museum itself. The goals are as follows:

1. Expand the definition of a worthwhile life.
2. Engender respect for and delight in the gifts of others.
3. Increase awareness of the wide variety of choices available in life for all . . . particularly students.

⁷⁰ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 139.

4. Encourage each individual to build upon his or her own special knowledge and inner strengths.
5. Promote the use of innate intelligence, intuition, self-exploration, and creative self-reliance.
6. Confirm the great hunger for finding out just what each of us can do best, in our own voice, at any age.
7. Empower the individual to choose to do that something really, really well.

All of these goals focus on the development of the individual rather than the ability to retain art historical facts. The first and second goals run parallel to new museum theory and Sandell's prescriptions. They advocate the development of the public's tolerance and acceptance of difference in others. Further, this difference is viewed as a gift and something to be fostered. By incorporating this idea into educational goals the AVAM is making it a priority in the development of educational activities as well as exhibition development. It can be assumed that the educational goals relate to the desired outcome of what the museum considers an ideal museum visit for the public.

Visions Magazine

The AVAM publishes an annual magazine, *Visions*. Each issue includes a letter from the founder and director, Rebecca Hoffberger, and the entire issue focuses on themes from the annually curated mega-exhibitions. The 2007-2008 issue contains short essays centered on the exhibit *All Faiths Beautiful: From Atheism to Zoroastrianism, Respect For Diversity of Belief*. One of the artists featured in the exhibit, Edith V. Tenbrink, was included in the exhibit because of her participation, along with her

husband John, in creating a religious group, the “Ancient Order of the Golden Percept,” in the early twentieth century. The group is described in *Visions Magazine* as a “unique, idiosyncratic blend of Eastern Religion, Western Occultism, Islam, and mystical Christianity, spiced with ample helpings of Freemasonry, Theosophy and Rosicrucianism.”⁷¹ Her work featured in the exhibit was inspired by her participation in the group.

Included in the essay about her paintings is a reference to the artist’s disability, including that she suffered from the paralysis of her right side, possibly from cerebral palsy or polio.⁷² The AVAM chose to include a photograph of Tenbrink, clearly depicting the artist, an elderly woman, with a disabled right hand and arm (figure 9). As already stated in Chapter One, Sandell struggles with the possibility of incorporating images of disabled people into exhibition display, citing the conflicts expressed by other scholars and curators. Most appear concerned with the idea of staring versus looking and are concerned with invoking “freak show-style approaches.”⁷³ The photograph of Tenbrink demonstrates another way that the AVAM utilizes images of disabled artists, fostering understanding and appreciation in museum visitors. As with the photograph of Judith Ann Scoot, the image of artist Edith V. Tenbrink (figure 9) is incorporated as a tool to enhance the reader’s appreciation of the works of art. By placing these photographs in

⁷¹ Rebecca Hoffberger, “The Lecture Paintings of Edith Valentine Tenbrink: Seven Keys of the Masters,” *Visions* 13 (2007): 15.

⁷² Hoffberger, “The Lecture Paintings of Edith Valentine Tenbrink,” 15.

⁷³ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 161. For further reading on the discussion of staring and disability see Rosemarie Garland Thompson, “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 56-75.

relation to an emphasis on works of art rather than the individual the AVAM frames the visitors gaze to use these images as a tool.

This chapter has demonstrated the connection between the AVAM and Sandell's scholarship. Although the museum does not draw any inspiration from Sandell's actual work, a case study of the AVAM illustrates a clear connection between the two. The AVAM provides examples of potential answers to some of Sandell's many questions and moreover brings to light areas of study that Sandell fails to address.

Chapter 3

Moving Beyond Display

In his later scholarship, Richard Sandell grapples with the questions posed by curators interviewed in “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes? Museum Collections and the Hidden History of Disability”: “Should we tell (and if so how?) the difficult stories around disability – of asylum history? . . . In what circumstances should a link with disability be made explicit (for example, an artist’s disability), where it might not otherwise be obvious to the audience?”⁷⁴ This passage also illustrates an uncertainty that museum workers have about how to interpret works within the collection “in ways which reflect and incorporate perspectives and insights from disabled people.”⁷⁵ In his research, Sandell expands on why these issues occur, often elaborating on how museums justify their exclusion of disability and why. Sandell refers to a few specific instances when disability has been incorporated into museum exhibitions but fails to find an institution that makes strides to incorporate disability into multiple aspects of its content. At the end of chapter 6 in *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, Sandell writes that he “has not attempted in this chapter to offer definitive solutions to the dilemmas which emerged from the research.”⁷⁶ That is the central critique that can be made against

⁷⁴ Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?,” 16.

⁷⁵ Sandell and others, “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?,” 16.

⁷⁶ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 172.

Sandell. Citing the study “Beggars, Freaks and Heroes?” Sandell chooses to focus on the specific concerns held by museum personnel concerning issues specific to display. Although these concerns are legitimate and Sandell offers a thorough analysis of them, he is unable to make concrete recommendations regarding exactly how to exhibit disability, and he makes no attempt to examine other ways in which a museum can incorporate or approach themes of disability.

A case study of the American Visionary Art Museum reveals a significant void in Sandell’s scholarship, his exclusion of a discussion of the importance of education. The educational role of museums is central to new museum theory, and a key resource for museums in combating social prejudice. By examining multiple aspects of new museum theory the possibilities for the inclusion of disability within the museum are expanded. In the first chapter of *The Educational Role of the Museum* Eilean Hooper-Greenhill introduces key themes for the role of education within new museum theory. The first is that due to the growing accountability standards for the museum associated with public financial support, museums have turned to their role as educators to justify their existence. Hooper-Greenhill writes, “The arena for educational work is no longer the ‘education room,’ but the whole museum. With this shift to a broader scope for ‘museum education,’ comes a necessity to accept a broader social responsibility . . . The educational role of the museum has become part of cultural politics.”⁷⁷ Hooper-Greenhill also emphasizes that each individual museum visitor arrives with prior knowledge and experiences that are “socially and culturally based” and influence the way that people

⁷⁷ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “Education, Communication and Interpretation: Towards a Critical Pedagogy in Museums,” in *The Educational Role of the Museum*, 2nd ed., edited by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2004), 4.

absorb and process knowledge.⁷⁸ If this is true, the information and knowledge gained from a museum visit can be considered an influential factor in a visitor's life and becomes a part of their "position in history."⁷⁹

The AVAM places education at the center of the mission and purpose of the museum. Unlike many other fine art museums that state objectives for educating the public about art objects in their mission statements, the AVAM emphasizes a desire to educate museum visitors for the purpose of encouraging them to overcome bias and prejudice that surrounds visionary art and artists. As already noted, this is then carried over into the educational goals of the AVAM, beginning with the desire to "expand the definition of a worthwhile life." This dedication to social change via a commitment to education places the AVAM directly in line with new museum theory. It also provides an opportunity to expand on Sandell's theories of inclusion and understanding beyond display and into other aspects of the museum.

In December 2008, the Education Department of the AVAM held a multi-day workshop and Salon titled "Seeing Beyond Sight" inspired by the artist Tony Deifell and his self-titled book that includes images from his work as a photography teacher at a school for the blind in North Carolina. Tony Deifell led two separate programs titled "The Seeing Beyond Sight Blind-folded Photography Challenge." Participants were paired off, and one person in each team wore a blind-fold while the other person was their guide. The teams then spent time walking around the museum campus taking photographs, which were then uploaded onto an internet site so that all participants could view one another's photographs. The groups were then given the opportunity to discuss

⁷⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, "Education, Communication and Interpretation," 13.

⁷⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, "Education, Communication and Interpretation," 13.

the photographs and their reactions to taking photographs without the ability to see.

Following two days of activity, a Salon was held focusing on “perspective,” specifically the perspective of being a disabled artist. The visionary artist Loring Cornish participated in helping participants, who were once again wearing blindfolds, to create “tactile collages.” Following the activities three guest speakers took the stage: Tony Deifell, Mark Riccobono, the executive director of the National Federation of the Blind; and David Linden, a neuroscientist at Johns Hopkins University. Each spoke on the topic of “perspective” and discussed how blindness and sight is understood within mainstream society.

This workshop actively engaged its participants in not only expanding their understanding of art created by disabled artists but also their understanding of that creative process. New museum theory encourages educational activities that move away from older theories on learning in the museum, theories that were founded on the idea that the museum visitor’s mind was an empty vessel to be filled with facts. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill describes older education methods as “presented in a highly didactic manner” that “appear nonnegotiable” to the visitor.⁸⁰ Hooper-Greenhill believes that this type of education is unappealing to many museum visitors, possibly deterring them from visiting the museum at all. She recommends educational methods that engage the visitor and activities “where the narratives are more loosely bounded, acknowledge alternative perspectives, are more closely linked to the everyday, use multiple communication channels, and invite response from visitors.”⁸¹ “Seeing Beyond Sight” was able to do all

⁸⁰ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “The Power of Museum Pedagogy,” in *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Hugh H. Genoways (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006) 242.

⁸¹ Hooper-Greenhill, “The Power of Museum Pedagogy,” 242.

of those things and create a dialogue between participants who were able to share their experiences.

Additionally, the AVAM makes strides to incorporate the surrounding community into museum activities and outreach. The Jim Rouse Center for Visionary Thought, located next door to the AVAM building, was designed for the purpose of outreach and education into the community. The AVAM website states, “The ultimate goal of the CVT is to energize both individuals and bureaucracies with a shared and renewed sense of positive potential and community action” and is described as “an independent, non-governmental think tank for identifying, exploring, and publicly promoting effective low-cost grassroots models of creative social responsibility, while supporting improved life in urban and regional centers . . .”⁸² This space provides an opportunity for the AVAM to educate and challenge stereotypes of difference within the local communities. As noted in chapter one of this thesis, new museum theorists Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Janet Marstine both encourage museums to participate actively in the growth of surrounding communities and to engage with its members. Andrea Witcomb describes this type of community outreach as central to new museum theory and writes, “One of the ways in which contemporary museums are attempting to challenge dominant views of the museum as a site of power relations is to invoke and encourage new relations between museums and communities.”⁸³

Expanding the scope of research beyond aspects of display to include others aspects of museum activities offers a more well rounded argument about the importance

⁸² www.avam.org/stuff/future.html. Visited 10/28/2008.

⁸³ Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge, 2003) 79.

of including disability in the fine art museum. A review of new museum theory reveals the current educational and social emphasis that is being placed on museums. The American Visionary Art Museum provides numerous examples of themes from Sandell's scholarship and new museum theory, combined to produce a new museum experience. This experience is focused on the individual museum visitor expanding their understanding of difference and creativity, as well as exposing the importance of community outreach and how this too can help combat social prejudices.

Conclusion

Richard Sandell has made great contributions towards illuminating the need for continued dialogue within the museum and museum studies fields on the topic of disability and disabled artists gaining representation in the fine art museum world. His scholarship has focused on current museums, examining their permanent collections and philosophies in regards to themes of disability. This thesis examines the state of the questions posed by Sandell, in part by considering the historiography of his scholarship, and, by utilizing a case study of the American Visionary Art Museum, offers opportunities for further exploration and research. The American Visionary Art Museum demonstrates different ways in which Sandell's scholarship might be applied in the museum setting, as well as providing examples of additional means of inclusion. As chapter three describes, Sandell's focus on museum display shows the need for study of other means of inclusion within the museum, especially within museum education and visitor activities.

One aspect of museums that neither Sandell's scholarship, nor this thesis touches on is the area of collecting. The AVAM does not actively collect for the purpose of expanding its permanent collection and Sandell's surveys and analyses focus on the current permanent collections of the museums interviewed. This leaves room for further study to engage in new questions that emerge about the potential importance of actively collecting works of art by disabled artists and works of art containing disability as a

theme. If new museum theory is correct in stating that museums are in part obligated to break down stereotypes and foster better understanding of marginalized communities, then collecting plays a large role in this process. Sandell begins at an obvious starting point, asking museums to examine works of art they already have, but leaves room for further research that can be applied to museums that do not have works of this nature.

The collecting process has historically played a central role in the purpose of museums and still constitutes a significant portion of many museums' current mission statements.⁸⁴ In 2004 the American Association of Museums released a guide to collection planning as a part of its Professional Education Series. The authors, James Gardner and Elizabeth Merritt, describe the importance of developing an intellectual framework for the collecting process. They introduce issues that are central to understanding how and why museums need to think critically about their collecting practices. Gardner writes that museums need to be aware that future goals for collecting may change and that an institution needs to be flexible in order to accommodate new ideas.⁸⁵

Nicola Clayton introduces additional issues that surround collecting practices in the article "Folk Devils in our Midst? Collecting from 'Deviant' Groups." Here Clayton focuses directly on the potential problems and also the positive outcomes that can occur

⁸⁴ For further discussion of contemporary issues surrounding collection practices see Simon J. Knell, ed., *Museums and The Future of Collecting* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

⁸⁵ James B. Gardner and Elizabeth E. Merritt, *The AAM Guide to Collections Planning* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2004), 9.

when museums collect works with “‘difficult’ subject matter.”⁸⁶ One issue that arises in a discussion on collection practices is how to define the disabled community. Clayton writes, “Attempting to represent any culture or community raises a number of problematic issues. An initial problem can be one of definition,” which is significant because groups “often do not exist as a single homogenous mass.”⁸⁷ Would it be necessary for museums to define disability for their collection practices and if so, how? Clayton also notes that by collecting “material” (in this case works of art) from alternative groups, museums are able to “alter the status of such material, desensitizing and legitimizing attitudes towards it.”⁸⁸ The writing of Sandell and other new museum theorists is analogous in many respects and both perceive similar possibilities within the display of objects. Finally, Clayton writes that material must be collected now, even if it will not be displayed until the future. For Nicola Clayton, the *act* of collecting makes a move towards legitimizing a group.

Clearly there remains room for further scholarship and study on this topic. In this thesis I have introduced additional means for the inclusion of disability within the fine art museum, expanding on Sandell’s research and using a case study of the American Visionary Art Museum to cite examples of additional opportunities. The role of museum collections and collecting practices as a means for the social inclusion of disability and disabled artists in the art world remains an open avenue for further examination.

⁸⁶ Nicola Clayton, “Folk Devils in Our Midst? Collecting From ‘Deviant’ Groups,” in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, 2nd ed., edited by Simon J. Knell (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 146.

⁸⁷ Clayton, “Folk Devils in Our Midst?,” 148.

⁸⁸ Clayton, “Folk Devils in Our Midst?,” 153.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: Main Entrance, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photograph by author



Figure 2: Eddie Arning, installation for the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photograph by author



Figure 3: Anonymous Artist, Untitled, 1950, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photo by author



Figure 4: *OCD: Obsessive-Compulsive Delight*, exhibition, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photograph by author



Figure 5: Detail, *OCD: Obsessive-Compulsive Delight*, exhibition, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photograph by author



Figure 6: Frank Calloway, installation in the exhibition *The Marriage of Art and Philosophy*, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008.
Photograph by author



Figure 7: Judith Ann Scott, installation in the exhibition *OCD: Obsessive-Compulsive Delight*, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photograph by author



Figure 8: Detail, Photograph of artist Judith Ann Scott, installation in the exhibition *OCD: Obsessive-Compulsive Delight*, the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Photograph by author



Figure 9: Edith Valentine Tenbrink, Courtesy of Bobby Furst. Photograph by Dan Mysers

Vita

Amanda Kyser Bryan was born on December 29, 1981, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She graduated from Chapel Hill High School, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 2000. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 2004. She completed internships at the Ackland Art Museum in the Education Department, the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in the Education Department and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in the Registrar's Office. Between 2004 and 2005 she was an assistant to Ann Stewart, owner of Ann Stewart Fine Arts. In 2008, she was a co-curator for "Portraits: More Than Just a Pretty Face" an exhibition of borrowed works from private collections around the country and works from the permanent collection of the Anderson Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.